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What Americans want to know about petanque



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How to build a petanque court

If you're thinking about building your own petanque court (i.e. [boulodrome](#)), the first thing you should ask yourself is — “Do I really need to do this?”

Remember that petanque, as invented and played in France, is often played on natural terrains — city squares or parks. It is often played on walkways that consist of nothing but gravel or crushed stone laid down directly on the bare earth.

If you live in the American Southwest, you probably don't need to build a terrain at all. The weather is so dry that your best bet is a natural terrain, like the [Palm Springs \(California\)](#)



[Petanque Club.](#)

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On the other hand, if you have water issues (or need to carve a petanque terrain out of a grassy area) you will need to engineer a terrain with a foundation that provides good drainage, especially if—

- you live in a wetter climate
- your soil is rocky or hard clay, so it does not allow rain to drain quickly
- you want to be able to play on the terrain within a short time after a rain

Basically, you want to avoid situations like this if possible. (Photo courtesy of Gary Jones, Carolina Petanque)



How big should it be?

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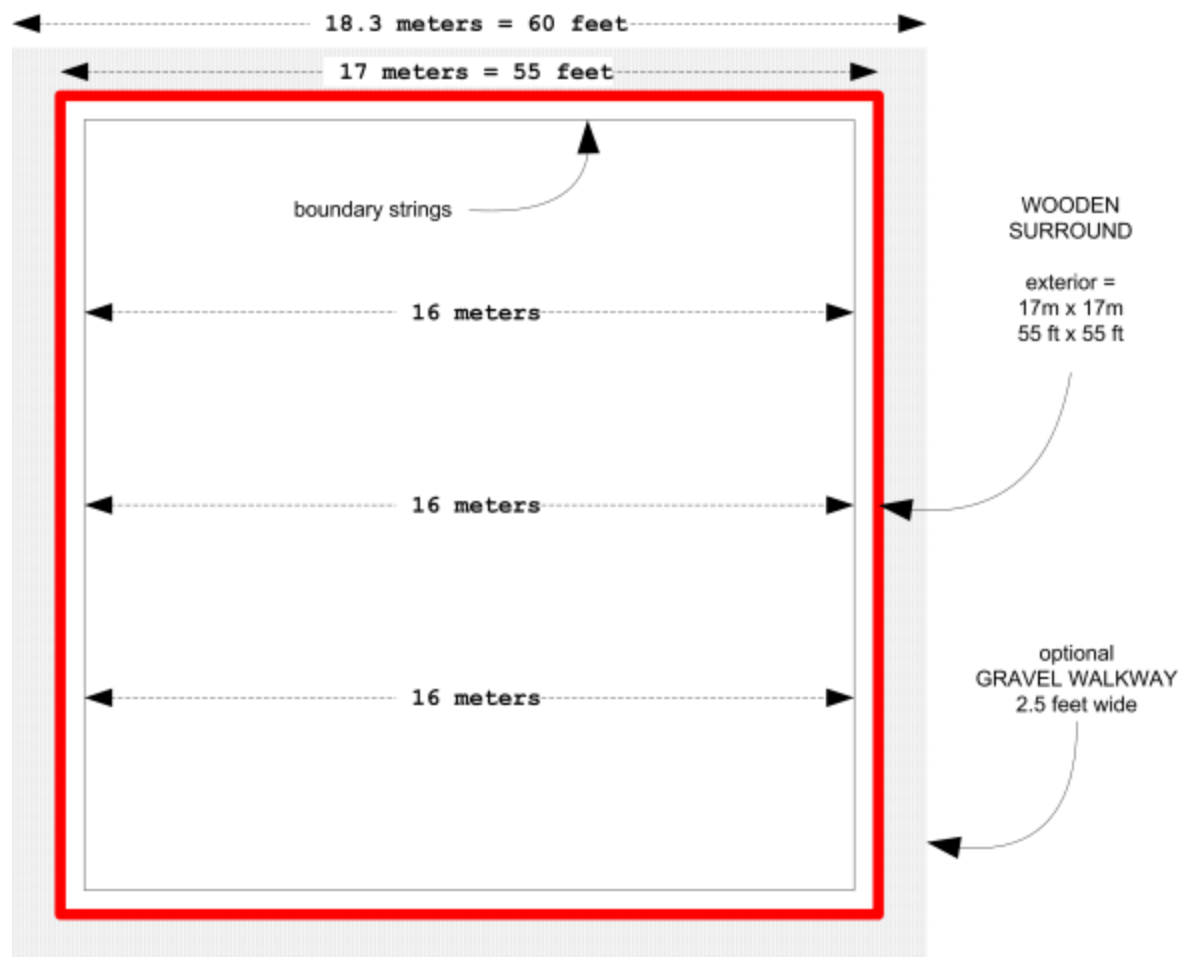
A handy rule-of-thumb — 3 meters = 10 feet

When someone starts thinking about building their own terrain, their first question is usually **“What are the official dimensions of a petanque terrain?”** The answer is that there are no specifications for an exact size. The FIPJP (the international petanque federation) specifies that for regional competitions the terrain must be a minimum of 3m x 12m (10' x 40'). For national and international competitions the terrain must be a minimum of 4m x 15m (13' x 50'). The national/international competition size (4m x 15m, or 13' x 50') is usually considered the “standard” size for a petanque terrain.

To be able to throw the jack to the maximum legal distance (10m) you will need a length of at least 12 meters. For a home court, we recommend at least the regional size— 3m x 12m (10' x

40'). If it is possible to make it longer than 40 feet, closer to 50 feet, you will probably be happier with it.

For a bouldrome in a public park, we recommend a square court 17m x 17m (55' x 55'), enclosed by a wooden surround. This provides a playing area of 16m x 16m, which can be divided (either north/south or east/west) by boundary strings into four 4m x 16m terrains, with dead-ball strings installed 30cm (12") inside the wooden surround on all four sides. A gravel walkway around the outside of the wooden surround is an optional but nice feature that also helps keep grass from invading the playing area.



If you're building a [covered terrain](#), you may wonder how much height you should have under the ceiling. International umpire Mike Pegg says that 5.5 meters should be the minimum height, but recommends 7 meters. If you're planning to hang light fixtures under the ceiling, you should take the location of the light fixtures into account when you're making your height calculations.



How do I build it?

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Here are a few pages that may be helpful —

- [Brian Forbes – designing and building a petanque terrain \(v3, 2021\)](#)
- [How to construct a petanque terrain](#) from Petanque New Zealand

There are also videos on Youtube that give you a good idea of the process.

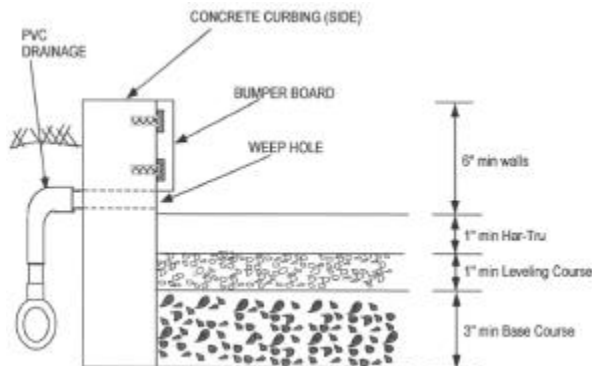
- [Building the new courts for the New York Petanque Club](#)
- [\(Building a\) Petanque pitch](#)
- [Création piste pétanque](#)
- [Construire mon terrain de petanque](#)
- [Création piste de pétanque](#)
- [Driving rebar with a demolition hammer](#)

There are many more bocce players than petanque players in the USA. Over the years they have built up a body of expertise in court construction. We petanque players should take advantage of it. So if you're looking for information on how to build your own terrain, you might try this—

- Look for information on how to construct a bocce court.
- Ignore instructions for high backboards— although you *will* want a low wooden surround.
- Pick a surface material that is rougher than most bocce courts. (No AstroTurf!)
- Adjust the court dimensions.



One place to start is this article from Popular Mechanics, [How to Build a Backyard Bocce Ball Court](#). The article has a nice picture of the basic construction layers. ▲

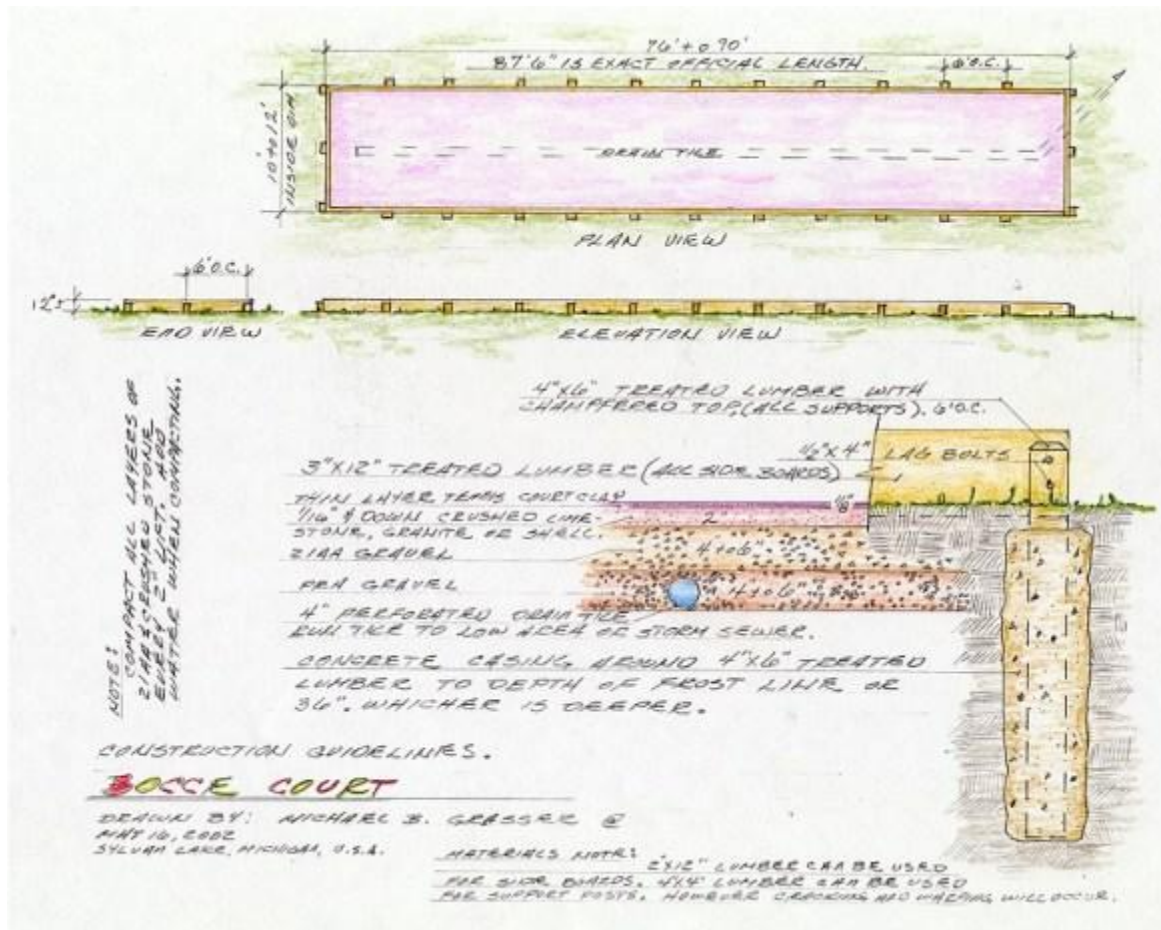


Detailed Hartru court specifications can be found on the [Bocce Standards Association](#) web site. Follow the links for “Court Standards”, then [“Bocce Court Specifications”](#). ▲

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[bocce-mon.com](#) sells just about everything related to bocce. In particular, it has [several pages of great information on how to build bocce courts](#), including especially its pages on [court installation](#) and [court perimeters](#). It also sells an [instructional DVD on how to make a bocce court](#). ▲

The US Bocce Federation (USBF) once published this colorful image. Click on the image to open a larger view. [▲](#)



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Youtube is amazing. You can find a video to tell you how to do just about anything. Search for [“BOCCE OR PETANQUE COURT BUILD OR CONSTRUCTION”](#) and you’ll find a lot of great information. For example, this video tells you (in two minutes!) what a French drain is. [▲](#)

How much does it cost to build a petanque terrain?

When you’re considering building your own petanque terrain, THE question, of course, is “How much will it cost?” And of course, as always, the frustrating answer is — “It depends.” It depends on what you want to build and where you want to build it.

1. What are your local climate conditions? Does it freeze in the winter? How many inches of rain and snow do you get during a year?
2. What is your local soil like — sand, dirt, clay? Characteristics of your local soil and climate will determine how rugged the construction needs to be to withstand extreme

weather, how deep the foundation needs to be to insure proper drainage, and so on. And those things will affect the cost.

3. After a heavy rain, do you want to be able to play on the court within a matter of hours? Or of days?
4. How big do you want the court to be? The bigger it is, the more material, time, and labor will be required.
5. What is the topography of your chosen site? Building a court on ground that is already flat and level is relatively straightforward. But if you're planning on building on a slope (e.g. the side of a hill) you may need to dig out the uphill side of the court and construct a retaining wall, put down infill on the downhill side and construct a retaining wall, or both. **REMEMBER...** *Gravity Never Sleeps*. Rainwater that now runs down the side of the hill will in the future want to run right into your new petanque court. So a hillside site poses special drainage issues. That's also true of a nice level site... if it is at the foot of a hill or in a natural depression in the ground.
6. Do you want to go bare-bones or luxury-level? Do you want benches and tables for spectators? Lights for night play? A utility shed to hold boules, lawn chairs, rakes, and other maintenance equipment?
7. What material do you want to use for the surface? In general, decomposed granite (DG) is your best bet, but in some areas other suitable materials (e.g. crushed volcanic cinders) may be available and economical. Bocce players like a surface of crushed seashell, but note that seashell requires regular maintenance and is [prone to getting over-grown with moss and algae](#).
8. What material do you want to use for the surround? Will old railroad ties work? How about lumber? Concrete? Brick? (Is there a lot of termite activity in your area? Wood might not be the best choice.)
9. How remote or accessible is your site? That is: How difficult is it to get construction materials to the site?
10. What will be the cost for material and delivery of materials? (Often the delivery costs for a truckload of crushed stone are greater than the costs for the stone itself.) It is a good idea to make a list of the materials that you expect to need. Depending on your design, it may include multiple loads of crushed rock of different sizes, a layer of weed barrier, french drains, materials for the surround, and so on.

11. What are the rates for rental of construction equipment? You may need to rent a power tamper to compact the layers of the surface, power equipment to drive rebar stakes for a railroad-tie surround, etc.
12. Who is going to do the work? Are you going to do all or some of the work yourself? Or are you going to hire labor? If so, what are the local rates for labor?

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With this many variables to consider, about the best we can say is that your new petanque court will probably cost somewhere between several hundred and several thousand dollars.

Get an estimate from a local contractor. Talking over the project with a professional will give you useful information about important things to consider. With his experience, he will have good ideas about site preparation. His proposal will give you a rough idea of what labor and materials will cost. All of this will be useful information when you sit down to make the decision whether to have a contractor do the project, or to do it yourself.



Designing and Building a Petanque Terrain

Before he retired, Brian Forbes was in charge of building and maintaining the petanque courts for the [Nottingham City Petanque Club \(NCPC\)](#) in Nottingham, England. He has experience in building and maintaining more than 30 international-sized petanque pistes. He's graciously given us permission to host his paper on **Designing and Building a Petanque Terrain**.

[*Brian Forbes – designing and building a petanque terrain \(v3, 2021\)*](#)

Here's a photo of the NCPC courts. Click for a larger image.



Some construction ideas



Ensenada, Mexico.



Alexandra Park, Bath, England



The short short version

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If this all seems a bit overwhelming, here is some short and simple advice from Philippe Boets, writing in 2006 on the Petanque America blog.

Your terrain doesn't need to be a plain rectangle with a smooth surface. An irregular shape, fitting in your natural surroundings, with some trees, bumps and dimples here and there is more natural, more challenging, and improves your skills. The simplest way to start is by asking your local building materials supplier, quarry or contractor how they build a crushed stone driveway in your area. Stone types may differ from state to state, but the principle remains the same: if a car can drive on it, and the top layer is a mix from fine particles up to 1/4 inch, it works perfectly for petanque. In some places that's called "1/4 inch minus" or simply "screenings". (The typical term in Provence is "*clapicette*", or "*du zéro/six*" meaning anything between 0 and 6 mm.) And don't forget to start with a weed barrier. It's cheap and will save you hours of pulling weeds.



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27 thoughts on "How to build a petanque court"



1. [Kim Badcock](#) on [April 11, 2014 at 4:41 pm](#) said:

G'day there, great site – lots of beaut info!

Last year our club built a terrain 'naturel' style on parkland in beautiful tropical Mission Beach, Far North Queensland, Australia. Our rainfall here is on average nearly 4 metres or 14 feet so drainage was a very important consideration.

We laid about a 150mm or 6 inch bed of decomposed granite over a slightly domed naturally drained piece of ground. We used rocks and garden beds and other landscaping elements to contain the playing surface material. The playing surface follows the natural contours of the ground. More info and pictures

here <http://www.missionbeachpetanqueclub.org.au/StoryofTerrain.html>

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[Reply ↓](#)



2. Russell Reed on [June 12, 2014 at 8:12 pm](#) said:

In the mountains of North Carolina, USA, I am building a terrain and have a question on drainage. I am at the point of putting down the fabric over the clay (our natural earth) and the the 4" drainage pipe with sediment sock around the perimeter, three sides, and then #57 clean granite drainage stone to the slopped clay from 3" to 6" deep across the terrain covering the drainage pipe.

After this is compacted, I've been told that I should install another layer of fabric before installing a 3" layer of crusher run granite and then the final 2" Of 3/16 to dust granite, compacting between all layers. I am questioning the 2nd fabric layer. Can anyone give me any ideas?

Like

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3. [Kim Badcock](#) on [June 13, 2014 at 2:26 am](#) said:

So far this year we have received 3750mm (12"3") of rainfall! it is not unusual to receive 250mm (10") in a 24 hour period in the monsoonal period! We have made no allowances for drainage apart from generally following the shape of the ground underneath. Our terrain is situated on a slightly domed part ground i.e. the terrain is slightly higher in the centre than it is on the outsides. We do not have timber or some other sort of edging or surround which would trap

rainfall runoff. We simply laid an approximately 150mm (6") thick bed of decomposed granitic sand (v. coarse) straight on top of the ground underneath.

Where we were concerned that rainfall runoff would remove material from the terrain we strategically placed granite boulders but not in any form of a continuous wall. The tip is to manage the rainfall runoff from the terrain rather than through the bed of the terrain – do have a look at the webpage on the construction of our

terrain <http://www.missionbeachpetanqueclub.org.au/StoryofTerrain.html>

Like

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4. Russell Reed on [June 13, 2014 at 7:43 am](#) said:

Thank you for your response and I envy you for how simple it was for you to construct your terrain. I am very new to Petanque and also being in the mountains are my challenges.

I am building this terrain on the side of a slope and because of all the large trees could only make it 12' wide and at that width one side is one cross tie high and the other is six ties high. I feel very lucky to be able to have it at all. Lots of our residents are looking forward to its completion.

The advice that I have received was to have one layer of driveway fabric under the drain field stone and then after it's compacted, to install another layer of fabric on top of that. I am looking for a second opinion on the second layer of fabric.

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5. Jules Lenoir on [March 8, 2015 at 11:50 am](#) said:

Here is a comment that I found on a post about building your own bocce court.

(<http://www.houzz.com/ideabooks/44307200/list/Backyard-Bocce>)

The post had some beautiful pictures of luxurious bocce courts overlooking the sea, etc. etc.

Which prompted the following comment. I think the comment has less weight against petanque courts, which tend to be less expensive and less elaborate. But still, it is an interesting consideration.

We see so many articles about which home improvements and remodels yield a good return on investment in the end and which do not. I would think a bocce court would perform very poorly in this regard.

The number of people who play it in this country is small, the courts force a huge, hot, dry dirt area into a prime position of one's yard, the opposite of an inviting garden or patio, and for all but the most devoted aficionados might be an expensive novelty that wears thin before it is even paid for. The court shown overlooking the ocean, for example, may be the dreamscape of the present owners, but would likely just be torn out (an expense) by most purchasers of such a property.

By all means build one if you want, but don't be surprised if you don't recoup the cost, or if it even detracts from the marketability of your house when you want to sell.

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6. [Jules Lenoir](#) on [March 8, 2015 at 12:00 pm](#) said:

Here's another comment from the same post on building a bocce court in your back yard.

We installed our own court using 2×6's, landscaping fabric to keep the weeds out, crushed limestone, and we secure a tarp when not in use to keep dogs and cats out. It's only 8×24 but that's all the room we could spare in our terraced yard. It cost us maybe \$100 in materials but the memories are priceless.

It suggests that a useful investment might be a tarp to cover the court. It will keep the neighborhood cats from using your court as a litterbox. (This might be a special problem for bocce courts, which are often surfaced with crushed sea shell.) And it might also help keep rain and snow off of your court, which might help in rainy climates or if you have drainage issues.

Like

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7. [Anthony](#) on [April 17, 2015 at 11:43 am](#) said:

Thank you for all your helpful links and construction advice, I am about to build my own playing field. I like your pragmatic instructions on how to modify bocce court instructions for petanque

(simple is good!). However the instruction “Pick a surface material that is rougher than most bocce courts” is a bit vague!

I’m on Northern CA and Decomposed Granite is economical and readily available but in doing my research, some sites suggest DG can be problematic and too fast. I’ll have good base of compacted base rock, but not sure if I need one or two layers of material above that and what exactly the specs for those materials should be. There are a large number of good local materials suppliers and several local quarries so I am pretty sure I can get whatever I need, I just don’t know exactly what to ask for!!

Any advice?

Like

[Reply ↓](#)



8. [Kim Badcock](#) on [April 17, 2015 at 4:16 pm](#) said:

Decomposed granite worked fine for our terrain. We did not compact the DG but obviously used a machine to level it out. We simply put a 150mm or 6” deep layer of DG straight over the grassed surface below.

Our terrain is in a very high (monsoonal) rainfall area, imagine 4m or 14’ of precipitation a year! With this in mind we left the terrain to mimic the lay of the land underneath so that the runoff from all rainwater naturally goes where it needs to.

Our terrain is now two and a half years old and is not in any need of surface replenishing. How does it play? High trafficked areas are harder and play faster. Other areas away from the beaten path are softer. The rain tends to pack down the top layer while still wet and that top layer “fluffs up” or becomes looser as it dries out. Pics

here <http://www.missionbeachpetanqueclub.org.au/StoryofTerrain.html>

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9. [Jules Lenoir](#) on [April 17, 2015 at 5:09 pm](#) said:

I’d say Kim’s voice of experience is just the ticket.

At the risk of over-thinking something that is probably best handled with dead reckoning, here are some additional thoughts.

DG is just fine.

I'd say that the factors with the biggest effect on your experience with your playing surface are

- (a) how hard the base layer is compacted,
- (b) how thick the layer of loose surface rocks is, and
- (c) the size and shape of the rocks in the surface layer.

(a) will determine what happens when the boule hits the ground. Boules will bounce more on a hard surface, so you'll have more control over your lobs on a softer surface. The trick with (a) is both in knowing and specifying the hardness that one wants and in knowing how one goes about creating it. The installation process consists of one or more cycles of spreading material, tamping it down and compacting it, and sprinkling with water. The hardness is determined more by how the material is installed than by the material itself. I'm afraid I can't help much there. I don't know if there is, for instance, some setting on an automatic tamper that determines how hard the surface is, or if that is determined by how long you tamp it, if you tamp it again after moistening it, etc. I think I'd talk to some local contractors with experience in building gravel paths and/or clay tennis courts.

(b) and (c) will determine how a rolling boule behaves. There are no official standards for this sort of thing, and petanque can be played on all sorts of surfaces with all sorts of variations here. In short, what you should get is a matter of personal taste. If you visit your local crushed-stone vendors you will see a large variety of sizes, textures, and colors to choose from. Remember the surfaces that you've played on, and pick something you like.

Your rock vendor will be able to tell you how much rock to buy to cover a given area to a given depth. You might buy that much, but don't go and dump it all on your court. If you put down too much rock, the surface may be too soft and slow. It is easier to add more surface material than it is to remove it. So keep your delivered surface rock in a pile "on the side". Initially, put down a thin layer, and then add more to taste. And nothing is irreversible. Too soft? A bit more compacting will handle that. Too hard? Add a little more surface rock.

Once installed, your court will take some time, maybe as much as a year, to "settle in" under the influence of the weather, rain and snow, your walking on it, and so on. Then, over years of play, the surface will change as rocks get crushed into dust, and material migrates from high-traffic to low-traffic areas, and from high spots to low spots. High spots will get hard as they get packed down and the dust layer washes off. Low spots will get softer as they fill with finer particles. That is, your surface will vary from spot to spot, and over time. In short, it will be Just Right for a petanque court.

There is no need strive for perfection and absolute uniformity. A petanque court is actually better — more interesting and more challenging — when it has ups and downs, hard and soft spots, rough and smooth spots. Happily, we can leave the quest for The Absolutely Flat And

Smooth to the bocce players.